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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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-* 'Spam Report' Trojan Sparks New Warnings! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard

"Saying it like it is!"

"-----"

It's going to be really tough having to go back to work on Monday. Vacations just don't last long enough, even though I was off for two weeks. I've been having a great time these past couple of weeks. A lot of rest and relaxation. There were days that I was quite busy, and some that I just laid back and did very little. I played some golf, in various areas, including in my own area as well as down on Cape Cod. We enjoyed the pool on those really hot and humid days, sat out and watched the rain from the "new" enclosed deck while having a cold drink or two, watched some late-night television and slept in late the next morning, and more. I guess the best part was not having to worry about what had to get done the next day, and whether or not we'd have the time to get it done. If we didn't, the following day was fine. It was great.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. I apologize for not having a column this week, but my wife's father passed away tonight, and I've just gotten home from the hospital. The time is now 12:45 am.

Needless to say, I'm exhausted and drained, and my brain just isn't functioning well enough to put a column together.

Again, I apologize, and I'll be back next week with, I hope, lots of STuff to talk about.

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Darkwatch: Curse of the West!

Group Blasts Sex In GTA!
Blazing Angels!
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Darkwatch: Curse of the West

Darkwatch: Curse of the West, the debut title from Sammy Studios internal development, is a cinematic 1st person shooter (FPS) with an original premise that blends Vampire-Horror and Western genres. They grind their enemies for fuel, fashion their skin into protective cloaks and create weapons designed to exterminate en masse, and they are the good guys. They are the Darkwatch, a vigilant strike-force that has protected man from evil incarnate since the dawn of civilization. Their newest and deadliest agent is Jericho Cross, an outlaw gunslinger pulled into their ranks by an unfortunate close encounter with a vampire lord. To save the West, and his own soul from damnation, Jericho must hunt the vampire through an American frontier now overrun by his evil minions. Along the way he relies on his deadly gunfighting skills and advanced weapons and vehicles put at his disposal by the Darkwatch, as well as a few surprises afforded him as a half-vampire; superhuman abilities and a trusty undead steed. Promising to deliver tremendous gameplay variety and set in a macabre and visually sensational depiction of a haunted Wild West, Darkwatch: Curse of the West promises to be one of the year's most exciting video games.

Features

- * Blast through a frightening re-imagination of the Wild West, with explosive FPS action framed by a cinematic storyline, and exceptional art and design work inspired by both Vampire-Horror and Western genres
- * Unique weapons, powerful assault vehicles, horse-mounted gunfighting and special vampire abilities bring new depth to FPS gameplay in both single and multiplayer
- * Take the 'un' out of 'undead' in a variety of ways with a wide assortment of 'Darkwatch-enhanced' weapons, including pistols, rifles, shotguns, rocket-launchers, dynamite and even weapon-specific melee attacks
- * Experience a 'living west' with massive seamless worlds, non-linear missions and dynamic enemy and NPC A.I. driven by a reputation and experience system
- * Location-specific damage brings precision to gunplay - tear the undead to pieces, or taunt the pesky living by shooting off hats or making them dance to your bullets
- * Online multiplayer capability with unique maps and original game modes

Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII

Experience the most gripping and famous battles of WWII through the eyes of a squadron commander and ace fighter pilot. From the battle for England, the attack on Pearl Harbor, to the bombing of Berlin, your pilot skills will create WWII history. Conquer the skies of Western Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific and bring your squadron back alive.

Key Features

- * WWII's most epic and famous air battles. Experience the greatest air battles of World War II in famous locations from across the globe. Whether it's the invasion of the Philippines, the fierce fighting for the deserts of North Africa, or the battle of Britain, the player and his squadron will be tasked with turning the tide of war.
- * Innovative squadron-based gameplay. AI-controlled wingmen will obey player commands. As the pilot's skills improve, so will the skills of his squadron. The pilot's heroism and leadership will grow during the course of the campaign as players fly with their squadron and evolve together into an ace fighting force.
- * A large variety of realistic-looking WWII aircraft. Pilot 40 authentic WWII aircraft including the famous P-51 Mustang, the P-38 Lightning, the B-17 Flying Fortress, the Luftwaffe's Messerschmitt, the Spitfire of Britain and the Japanese Zero. From the wing rivets, to the nose art, to the detailed cockpits, these planes are just like the real thing.
- * Twenty heart-stopping missions in a compelling storyline. Pilots will begin as untrained recruits and evolve through battle experience into ace combat pilots. WWII missions will take place around the globe in places like England, Germany, France, Morocco, Midway and Okinawa.
- * Authentic WWII atmosphere. Fly in close to Germany's industrial terrain for a bombing raid, strafe the islands of the pacific, or emerge from the cloud cover over London and engage the enemy. The environment looks so real you'll feel like you're the pilot in a famous WWII movie.
- * Planes are easy to handle and fun to fly. No need to attend the Air Force Academy to pilot these planes; players can jump right into air combat action.
- * Xbox Live for up to 20 players online. Engage in head-to-head dogfights or cooperative team play between squadrons on huge maps with large formations.

National Halo 2 Xbox Tournament Contest Giveaway

Battleground Zero announced the launch of the National Halo 2 Tournament Contest. Battleground Zero provides gamers with cash and prize competitions in more than a dozen Xbox Live enabled games. Now, Battleground Zero members, as well as dedicated Halo 2 fans, can compete in the National Halo 2 Tournament Contest Giveaway.

The National Halo 2 Tournament guarantees Xbox Live gamers a thrilling-ride, with a Grand Prize payout of more than \$2,500.00 in prizes and a total possible payout of over \$4,000.00 in cash prizes. The tournament will be a singles only completion, and provide 1st, 2nd and 3rd place prizes.

Below is a list of possible prizes:

Grand Prize:

Sylvania 42" Plasma ED Monitor
Polk Audio Theater System
Xbox 360 Console
2 - Xbox 360 Game Titles
4gb iPOD Mini
\$50.00 iTunes Gift Certificate

2nd Place Prize:

Polk Audio Theater System
Xbox 360 Console
2 - Xbox 360 Game Titles
4gb iPOD Mini
512mb apple iPOD shuffle
\$50.00 iTunes Gift Certificate

3rd Place Prize:

Xbox 360 Console
2 - Xbox 360 Game Titles
4gb iPOD Mini
512mb apple ipod shuffle
\$50.00 iTunes Gift Certificate

<http://www.battlegroundzero.com>

Group Blasts Video Game Over Sex Content

A media watchdog group has denounced the maker of the hugely popular video game "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" over graphic sexual content that allegedly exists in the game and can be unlocked with an Internet download.

The game's plot is already objectionable to many people: Its main character carjacks for fun and profit and picks up women along the way.

But some say its content becomes sexually explicit if players download and install a modification to the game - one of many so-called "mods" available on Web sites maintained by video game enthusiasts.

"While San Andreas is already full of violent behavior and sexual themes, the pornographic sex scenes push it over the edge," said David Walsh, founder of The Minneapolis-based National Institute on the Media and the Family, which issued a "nationwide parental alert" Friday.

The controversy has prompted an investigation by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, which determines the rating on every video game sold. Rockstar Games issued a statement Friday, confirming the investigation and avoiding comment on whether its programmers created the sex scenes in the first place.

"We also feel confident that the investigation will uphold the original rating of the game, as the work of the mod community is beyond the scope of either publishers or the ESRB," the company said.

The mod's author - Patrick Wildenborg, 36, of Deventer, Netherlands - told The Associated Press on Friday that his code merely unlocks content that is already included in the code of each off-the-shelf game.

"If Rockstar Games denies that, then they're lying and I will be able to prove that," Wildenborg wrote in an e-mail. "My mod does not introduce anything to the game. All the content that is shown was already present on the DVD."

Sen. Clinton Seeks 'Grand Theft' Sex Scene Probe

Sen. Hillary Clinton pressed on Thursday for a government investigation into how simulated sex cropped up in a modified version of the blockbuster criminal adventure video game "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas."

Clinton asked the U.S. Federal Trade Commission to investigate the origins of a downloadable modification that allows simulated sex in the personal computer version of one of the most popular and controversial video games in history.

"We should all be deeply disturbed that a game which now permits the simulation of lewd sexual acts in an interactive format with highly realistic graphics has fallen into the hands of young people across the country," Clinton wrote in a letter to the head of the Federal Trade Commission.

Saying the problem of explicit video games was "spiraling out of control," Clinton also said she was introducing legislation that would crack down on the sale of violent and sex-laden games to minors.

The legislation would impose a \$5,000 penalty on retailers who sell adult-rated video games to underage children.

Clinton asked the FTC to look into whether Grand Theft Auto's rating of "M" (Mature 17+) should be changed to the rare "AO" (Adult Only), which would threaten to crimp sales at large retail outlets.

She requested the agency to study whether retailers' enforcement policies were adequate to keep adult-rated video games out of the hands of minors.

An FTC spokeswoman said the agency had received Clinton's letter and was reviewing it.

Clinton's comments were the latest in a chorus of criticism that has intensified since the revelation about sex scenes in the modified Grand Theft Auto. The game series has drawn numerous detractors because of its sexual and violent content.

Players who download a modification, known as "hot coffee," from the Internet can make a male character engage in various sex acts with a virtual "girlfriend." Sex is suggested in the official version of the game, but does not happen on screen.

The game's manufacturer, a subsidiary of Take-Two Interactive Software Inc. called Rockstar Games, has said hackers are responsible for the modification.

In a statement released on Thursday, Rockstar said it supported the video game rating system and efforts to keep adult-rated games away from children.

But without referring to Clinton, the company said it was "disappointed by comments that misrepresent Grand Theft Auto, detracting from the innovative and artistic merits of the game."

"Unfortunately, the recent confusion only serves to suggest that games do not deserve the same treatment as other forms of creative expression," Rockstar said in its statement.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board last week launched a probe into whether the sexual minigame content was deliberately hidden in the game code and unlocked by the "hot coffee" modification, or if it was solely the result of the modification.

The "hot coffee" modification, which violates the game's software user agreement, is the result of hackers disassembling and then combining, recompiling and altering the game's source code, Rockstar said.

The PlayStation2 version of "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" was the No. 1 game of 2004, selling just over 5 million copies, according to industry researcher NPD Funworld.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

HP Launches New Printer Technology

Hewlett-Packard Co., striving to remain the market leader in computer printers, launched a new technology for inkjet printers Monday that cuts photo printing time in half.

The first printer with a printing head made with the new technology will be a \$199 machine that can print a 4-by-6-inch photo in 14 seconds. It goes on sale later this month.

HP is following up this fall with a heavier-duty printer intended to supplant color laser printers for office use and a multifunction machine that also scans and faxes.

As is usual with inkjet printers, the fastest printing mode means a trade-off in quality. Printing a 4x6 picture on the most durable paper at the highest quality setting would take 80 seconds even on the new printer.

But analysts agreed that the 14-second prints would be more than good enough for most home users.

The new technology comes at time when HP, while still the largest maker of inkjet printers, is fighting aggressive competitors. Its share of the U.S. inkjet market dropped 12 percentage points to 35 percent in the first quarter this year, according to research group Gartner Inc.

The segment is critical for HP.

Despite former chief executive Carly Fiorina's drive to diversify the company, printing and imaging accounted for 60 percent of HP's operating profit in the quarter ended April 30. Fiorina was forced out earlier this year when that drive appeared to founder.

Faster printouts could help HP regain some clout in the market, but the development is unlikely to be decisive, said Ron Glaz, analyst at IDC.

"Printing speed is important, but I don't think it's the number one thing when people go shopping," Glaz said. He believes image quality and cost per print are more important considerations.

HP also addressed the price issue Monday, saying a 4x6 print can cost as little as 24 cents for customers who buy its "value packs," which combine paper and ink. That makes it competitive with Main Street photofinishers who print on traditional silver halide paper.

Competitors, particularly Dell and Lexmark, have been encroaching on HP's lead by cutting their prices and bundling printers with computers, said Gartner analyst David Haueter.

"This seems to be a pattern we've seen before - competitors gain on HP by slashing prices, then HP introduces new technology that lets them move ahead," Haueter said.

It cost HP \$1.4 billion to develop the new inkjet head and it took five years, an investment HP says it is sure will pay off.

"It gives us a huge manufacturing cost advantage," said Vyomesh Joshi, head of the printing and imaging group. "We want to get our cost structure right and regain our market share."

Inkjet heads are built in thin layers. One layer heats the ink and sends it through microscopic nozzles in another layer.

Until now, HP has made the layers separately and assembled them mechanically. In the new heads, the assembly step is eliminated. The nozzle layer is created on top of the lower layer by photolithography, the same process that is used to make computer chips.

The new process is much more precise, making for more efficient print heads with more nozzles that print faster. The new printers have more than 3,900 nozzles spitting out 93 million ink droplets per second.

Another advantage of the new technology is that it makes it easier to make large inkjet heads with even faster printing speeds for industrial applications.

HP said it wants to take the technology there, but did not provide any details.

Addressing another consumer concern - ease of use - the new printers will read barcodes preprinted by HP on the back of paper fed into them, allowing them to automatically recognize what size and type of paper is loaded. They will also warn if the paper is loaded upside down, a not uncommon way to waste ink and paper.

Other announcements from HP Monday:

HP's Snapfish photo site is partnering with Walgreen Co. By September, customers across the country will be able to upload digital photographs to site and pick up prints at a local Walgreen's drugstore. Recognizing that not all photo printing will be done at home, HP bought Snapfish in March.

HP introduced six new portable printers, including the Photosmart 475 GoGo, which it says is the first to print 5x7 prints in addition to 4x6 ones. The \$275 printer, which is the size of a toaster, also contains a 1.5-gigabyte hard drive that can store around 1,000 photos, depending on quality.

Firefox Continues to Spread

The Mozilla Foundation's Firefox browser nibbled off a small market-share portion from Microsoft's Internet Explorer (IE) in June, continuing a consistent monthly trend this year.

Firefox increased its market share to 8.71 percent, up from 8 percent in May, while IE's share shrank to 86.56 percent from 87.23 percent, NetApplications.com, an Aliso Viejo, California, maker of applications for monitoring and measuring Web site usage, said this week in a statement.

Since the beginning of the year, Firefox has increased its market share every month between 0.5 percent and 1 percent, mostly at the expense of IE, according to NetApplications.com, which compiles its browser usage data from more than 40,000 Web sites monitored by its HitsLink.com service.

As Firefox approaches the 10 percent market share milestone, it is expected to gain "significant traction" once its acceptance grows among corporations, according to NetApplications.com.

Rounding out the top five browsers in June were Apple Computer's Safari with 1.93 percent market share, America Online's Netscape with 1.55 percent, and Opera Software's Opera with 0.59 percent.

IDG Commits to Boston for Future Macworld Expos

Macworld Expo show organizers, IDG World Expo, have committed to holding the East Coast Macworld Conference & Expo in Boston for the foreseeable future. While the number of exhibitors dropped slightly this year, IDG officials said the attendance at the show is on par with last year.

We are on the books here [at the Hynes Convention Center] and there are absolutely no plans to move, David Korse, IDG World Expo President, told MacCentral.

Now in its second year after returning to Boston from New York, IDG took the show from the expanses of the new Boston Convention & Exposition Center (BCEC) to the Hynes Convention Center, which is more centrally located in the Back Bay area of Boston. The Hynes is a better fit for Macworld Boston because of its size and the decreased costs.

Economics certainly played a role a role in the move for us and the exhibitors, said Korse. Exhibitors got a great return on their investment and people this week will certainly get their money's worth.

Korse said that many of the people that attended last year's show returned this year. IDG said they expect the number to come in at approximately 8,000 attendees.

For exhibitors, which numbered about 63 compared to last year's 75, Korse said IDG must continue to demonstrate that Macworld Expo is a worthwhile show.

We have an event here that works, said Korse. We continue to do events that are substantially smaller than Macworld Expo. As long as Macworld Expo works, we'll continue to do it.

Non-English Domain Names Likely Delayed

Concerns about "phishing" e-mail scams will likely delay the expansion of domain names beyond non-English characters, the chairman of the Internet's key oversight agency said Friday.

Vint Cerf, head of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, would not speculate on when such characters might appear but said Internet engineers must now spend time "trying to winnow down, frankly, the number of character (sets) that are allowed to be registered."

Demand for non-English domain names is high outside the United States and a U.N. panel studying Internet governance said in a report Thursday that "insufficient progress has been made toward multilingualization." It cited the lack of international coordination and technical hurdles as among the problems.

Officially, the Internet's Domain Name System supports only 37 characters - the letters of the Latin alphabet, 10 numerals and a hyphen.

But in recent years, in response to a growing Internet population worldwide, engineers have been working on ways to trick the system into understanding other languages, such as Arabic, Chinese and Japanese.

Engineers have rallied around a character system called Unicode.

But security experts warned earlier this year of a potential exploit that takes advantage of the fact that characters that look alike can have two separate codes in Unicode and thus appear to the computer as different. For example, Unicode for "a" is 97 under the Latin alphabet, but 1072 in Cyrillic.

Subbing one for the other can allow a scammer to register a domain name that looks to the human as "paypal.com," tricking users into giving

passwords and other sensitive information at what looks like a legitimate site. It's much like how scammers now use the numeral "1" sometimes instead of the letter "l" to trick users.

"In some of the early tests, ... it became clear we had opened up the opportunity for registering very misleading names," Cerf said in a conference call wrapping up ICANN's meetings this week in Luxembourg. "This kind of potential confusion leads to parties going to what they think are valid Web sites."

Cerf said it may be possible to proceed with character sets that aren't at risk of confusion as the standards-setting Internet Engineering Task Force tackles the broader security concerns with non-English names.

Tests of non-English characters have been going on for years, and in a few cases they are fully operational. Last year, operators of the German ".de" domain began offering 92 accented and other special characters, including the umlaut common in German names.

But ICANN has yet to approve domain names entirely in another language; all addresses now must end with an English string such as ".com."

'Spam Report' Trojan Sparks Warnings

A Trojan-laden e-mail message is continuing to spread since first being reported last Thursday, according to security firm MessageLabs.

The firm rated the outbreak level as high for the "spam report" Trojan, which attempts to dupe users by appearing to be regular e-mail.

Users receive e-mail messages that seem to be from their I.T. departments warning them that their machines are being used improperly.

Users are told that their e-mail accounts have been used to send out a "huge amount of unsolicited spam messages during the recent week," and are asked to take five to 10 minutes to confirm information that supposedly is included in an attached document.

"If you choose to ignore our request, you leave us no choice but to cancel your membership," the message reads.

If a recipient is tricked into opening the file, an executable is launched, infecting the machine with Trojan-Downloader.Win32.Small.arf. The Trojan then downloads harmful content from an external site.

The use of threatening messages is very common, said Sophos security consultant Carole Thériault. This latest threat is an example of how sophisticated the messages have become.

"Telling people that they're sending out spam plays on a very specific fear," she said. "Virus writers have gotten very good at figuring out what people are afraid of, and exploiting that."

Also on the rise is the use of enticements to spread viruses. One example would be an e-mail virus that spreads by telling users they overpaid for an item they bought online. Users then open the attached document for information on how to get a refund and end up infecting their machines.

To limit the spread of Trojans that use social engineering, Sophos recommends that I.T. departments put in protections that prevent users from ever getting the messages.

"Blocking all e-mail messages that contain programs is a good, basic step," Theriault said. "You can let in messages that have documents attached, but stop those that contain applications."

Because the virus-laden messages are so good at preying on user fears or desires, I.T. will have to be more proactive in blocking rather than employing user education, she noted.

Coalition Issue Definitions for 'Spyware'

Anti-spyware vendors and consumer groups took a stab at issuing uniform definitions for "spyware" and "adware" on Tuesday in hopes of giving computer users more control over their machines.

The definitions seek clarity that could help improve anti-spyware products, educate consumers and fend off lawsuits from developers of software that sneaks onto computers.

It's not clear what, if anything, the taxonomy itself might accomplish in ending the deception involved in placing intrusive and damaging programs on people's computers.

The 13-page document is silent, for instance, on what developers must do to obtain consent from consumers. Nor does the document, still formally a draft, clearly state how specific programs might fall under a certain category.

"It's not the end game but it's a great starting point," said Dave Cole, director of product management at Symantec Corp., a member of the coalition that spent three months crafting the terms. "You've got to have a foundation, a common vocabulary to start with ... and have all of us speak the same language."

Forty-three percent of adult U.S. Internet users say they've been hit with spyware, adware or both, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project. More than 90 percent of Internet users have changed their online behavior, meanwhile, to try to avoid becoming victimized.

The coalition flags as potential threats - an umbrella definition that includes spyware, adware and other categories such as "hijackers" and "cookies" - programs that:

impair users' control over their systems, including privacy and security;

impair the use of system resources, including what programs are installed on their computers; or

collect, use and distribute personal or otherwise sensitive information.

By classifying "adware" as falling under the umbrella term, "Spyware and Other Potentially Unwanted Technologies," the coalition avoided a key dispute that has led to lawsuits: Is adware a form of spyware or are the

two separate?

The coalition recognized that not all advertising software is unwanted and restricted the use of "adware" to the potentially unwanted kind. It created a separate category for "hijackers" that change browser settings and noted that some data files, or "cookies," have legitimate uses for saving preferences.

The industry can now discuss and define how specific technologies or practices harm users, said Ari Schwartz of the Center for Democracy and Technology, which led the coalition. He said more specific guidelines are expected this fall.

The definitions themselves could undergo revision after a one-month period for public comment.

Release of the definitions comes as Microsoft Corp. acknowledges that it has revised its treatment of adware made by Claria Corp., formerly known as Gator Corp.

Instead of putting the programs in "quarantine," Microsoft's anti-spyware tool recommends users "ignore" the items it detects. Microsoft said the change was unrelated to speculation that Microsoft has been in talks to buy Claria (Neither company would comment on any talks).

The three months that the coalition spent discussing the terms, Edelman said, could have been better used to get to the heart of the problem: Clarifying what constitutes a user's consent to allow spyware or adware to be installed on a personal computer.

The coalition did, however, provide tips for consumers, including advice on how to read license agreements and other "fine print" where consent is often sought.

Adware vendors said they welcome clearer rules on what's acceptable, though they consider definitions a good start.

"Is it perfect? No, but any kind of refinement, any added clarity is going to be helpful," said Sean Sundwall, a spokesman for 180solutions Inc. "50 percent is way better than 0 percent."

Bill Day, chief executive of WhenU.com Inc., said the terms "will tend to add structure to what has now been unstructured conversations" with anti-spyware vendors.

Schwartz said nothing in the definitions or the upcoming "best practices" guidelines will eliminate all differences among makers of anti-spyware programs.

"Companies are going to make decisions, and people are going to have to decide which anti-spyware tool is best for them," Schwartz said. "Each company itself will have to make decisions about whether something is unwanted or unexpected."

or jawing with co-workers, costing their employers 759 billion dollars a year, according to a new survey.

Forty-four percent of 10,000 respondents to the poll by America Online and Salary.com said the most popular way to while away time in the office was through personal Internet use, including e-mail, instant messaging and chat rooms.

Another 23 percent of those polled preferred running down the clock by socializing with co-workers.

Other ways of frittering away time on the boss's dollar included making personal phone calls, running errands and an activity described as "spacing out."

Two hours of frittered-away time adds up to about twice the slacking off that employers expect.

"A certain amount of slacking off is already built into the salary structure," says Bill Coleman, senior vice president at Salary.com.

"Our survey results show that workers, on average, are wasting a little more than twice what their employers expect. That's a startling figure," he said.

The survey found that American workers were wasting 2.09 hours per day, not including a lunch break.

The biggest time wasters were young people born since 1970, while older people still in the workforce were much harder working.

Employees in the insurance sector did little to redeem their unflattering public image, clocking up 2.5 hours a day in frittered-away time, the survey said.

Based on the average yearly annual salary of 39,795 dollars per year, all of that wasted time adds up to 759 billion dollars.

"It's interesting to note that the Internet was cited as the leading time-wasting activity," said Samara Jaffe, director of careers/AOL Find a Job, America Online. "It goes to show how integrated it has become to the daily functions of our personal and professional lives."

Microsoft Denies Special Deals with Open-Source Community

Microsoft officials denied yesterday that the software giant will collaborate with open-source software developers to run Microsoft's products on top of other operating systems such as Linux.

The head of Open Source Development Labs (OSDL), Stuart Cohen, started rumors flying on Tuesday when he offered comments about upcoming cooperation with Microsoft. Cohen made those remarks while speaking with attendees at the Commonwealth Technology Forum in London.

The OSDL, founded in 2000, is a global consortium dedicated to accelerating the adoption of Linux.

"OSDL has always held the opinion that Microsoft will listen to its customers and find a way to successfully participate in open source," said Jennifer Cloer, an OSDL spokesperson, from a media office in Oregon. "However, there are not currently any collaboration efforts to report. Stewart made those comments about future expectations, but there have been no back-room meetings or secret agreements," she said.

Cohen did not respond to requests to discuss the basis of his comments on collaboration with Microsoft.

While Cohen's comments Tuesday clearly fuel the speculation that the OSDL might be trying to broker a deal with Microsoft, the company officials remain adamant about not changing long-standing policies regarding open-source development.

"With specific regards to speculation that Microsoft may begin developing applications to run on open source platforms, I do want to confirm that Microsoft does not have any plans to port applications to Linux," said Katherine Clouse, a spokesperson from the Waggener Edstrom Rapid Response Team for Microsoft.

Microsoft's general manager of platform strategy, Martin Taylor, used an e-mail exchange yesterday to deny that Microsoft will pursue any collaboration with the OSDL.

"We have and will continue to make our strategic bets on the Windows platform. Simply put, we believe that Windows provides greater business value and lower long-term costs for customers than competing platforms, including Linux," Taylor wrote.

However, Taylor admitted that Microsoft does engage in limited collaboration with selected manufacturers.

"We understand many of our customers operate in mixed environments, and we are committed to working together with customers, partners and the industry to provide solutions that meet customer needs," Taylor wrote.

He noted that Microsoft has an agreement with Motorola that allows that manufacturer to build Linux-powered phones that include Microsoft's proprietary ActiveSync protocol. As another example, Taylor said Microsoft currently licenses certain Windows Media technologies to TurboLinux so that they may use these technologies as part of their bundled Linux distributions.

Cohen, the OSDL chief, said on Tuesday that his organization is continuing to push for widespread adoption of Linux. To that end, he announced the appointment of Claude Beullens as director for Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA).

Beullens brings nearly 30 years of experience in enterprise computing, sales and marketing to lead OSDL's efforts and initiatives throughout the region. He comes to OSDL after serving in product, engineering and sales and marketing management positions at AMC, Apollo Computer, Hewlett-Packard and MC2. He is fluent in English, French, German, Dutch and Luxembourgish.

"There is a philosophical foundation in place throughout Europe that drives the adoption of Linux and open source technologies to achieve social and economic advancement," Cohen said at the forum on Tuesday.

"OSDL can contribute to this environment by providing resources that will

accelerate Linux deployments for local governments, local and international businesses and with European entrepreneurs. Claude's extensive experience and leadership in the European software industry will significantly enhance this contribution."

Mark Spencer, president of Digium, an open-source telecommunications hardware supplier, is not convinced that Microsoft will not pursue the Linux platform. He said Microsoft already has hired experts to learn more about open-source technology.

"Open Source is now a market reality. Microsoft historically has an amazing ability to turn itself around when new technologies develop," said Spencer. "If Microsoft is looking at open source, then Microsoft wants to make sure it has its bases covered."

Spencer said Microsoft likes to try new things before buying into it. The company's recent decision to share source code with other software developers is an indication that Microsoft is interested in getting into the open-source market.

"Microsoft is very adaptable. At some point it will have to have a play in the open-source market," said Spencer.

Competition Slashing Costs of Broadband

Telephone and cable TV companies are slashing broadband prices and boosting connection speeds as the two monopoly-prone industries prepare to lock horns on multiple fronts.

Comcast Corp. fired the latest shot in the battle this week by announcing plans to boost the speed of its entry-level cable broadband service to 6 megabits per second - as much as four times faster than a typical DSL connection over a phone line.

That move follows a series of promotions which have lowered introductory rates for a high-speed Internet line to between \$15 and \$30 a month, down from the typical \$30 and \$45 a month.

The prize is far larger than signing up more high-speed Internet users, analysts say. Companies are trying to lock in customers who may soon be offered the convenience of buying phone, cable, Internet and wireless services from a single provider out of convenience.

Two of the big regional phone companies, Verizon Communications Inc. and SBC Communications Inc., are spending billions to replace their copper lines with fiber-optic cables that provide enough capacity to deliver hundreds of channels of cable TV starting later this year.

The cable companies, meanwhile, are rolling out phone service over their cable lines and exploring options to add cell phones to their mix.

In advance of this head-to-head competition, Verizon, SBC and Qwest Communications International Inc. recently cut their introductory rates for DSL to \$15 or \$20 per month, and the cable carriers Comcast, Time Warner Inc. and Charter Communications Inc. sweetened their introductory prices to \$20 to \$30 per month.

The phone companies are especially "willing to take a hit on margins... if they can keep their landline users," said Mike Paxton, a senior analyst at In-Stat, a technology research firm in Scottsdale, Ariz.

But by limiting the price cuts to new customers, the companies may risk angering their current subscribers.

"It's frustrating that they're not giving their loyal customers the same kind of deal," said Kerry Smith, an attorney from South Philadelphia who subscribes to Comcast for cable, but pays Verizon for Internet and phone service.

The cable and phone companies are betting that existing customers will find it too inconvenient to switch. That's why cable operators - which are ahead of phone companies in signing up broadband Internet users - don't feel as pressured to slash prices as deeply, Paxton said.

Even in markets where DSL prices have dropped, cable has not been hurt badly, Paxton said.

"It's frankly a pain in the butt to switch," he said.

Cable broadband typically costs more than DSL, but cable operators have emphasized speed, arguing that their rates are competitive since the connections are often faster. Phone companies, however, have been closing the speed gap between cable and DSL.

Comcast's speedier connections will be available later this month in Pennsylvania, New England, New Jersey, Maryland, Michigan and Washington, D.C. For most of its other markets, the new speeds will be available by the end of summer. In May, Qwest unveiled a premium DSL service with a top download speed of 5 Mbps.

"Speed very much matters. Reliability matters," said Dave Watson, executive vice president of cable operations at Comcast.

The phone companies appear to believe that customers are more aware of price than speed.

"A lot of people can't tell the difference" in download speed, spokeswoman Bobbi Henson said.

SBC has been the most aggressive in cutting prices. The company has cut its DSL price at least three times in less than two years - from \$26.95 in early 2004 to \$19.95 last November and \$14.95 in June, said spokeswoman April Borlinghaus.

But the Internet price war is just a precursor of a larger battle to come between the industries.

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